

RINGSTONES AS ESOTERIC AND ART ITEMS

When esoteric seed sprouted in art and aesthetics in India is difficult to assess but the study of a number of seals from the Indus region reveals that the art has been the handmaid of religious and cult practices from its very inception. A cluster of geometrical motifs, squares, triangles, circles, entwined creepers, *svastika* design, etc. on one hand and animals tied with a post, *yonis* and *liṅgas*, abundance of terracotta female figurines do suggest a votive or ritual purpose¹. Subsequently, the human shaped object of the copper age datable earlier than the 1st millennium B.C. hints to the same probability². And when a Vedic sage came forward with a golden figure of Indra on his palm and wanted to settle it for ten cows with the firm assurance that it had the potency to kill enemies, he was just propagating the cult of *tantra*³.

The punch marked coins assignable from about the 7th century B.C. to the 2nd century B.C. bear a number of interesting motifs like wheel, sun, moon, crescent, hill, trident, triangle, wheel within square, dotted circle, arched hill, taurine, elephant, bull, fish, tree, and a host of other symbols. Interpreted differently for the purpose

¹ S. R. RAO, *Dawn and Devolution of the Indus Civilization*, Delhi, 1991, p. 296, P.P.C.

² N. R. BANERJEE, *Treasures of the National Museum*, Delhi, 1992, p. 7, pl. 1.7.

³ *Rgveda* IV. 24. 10.

of identification of place and guild of origin, the illustrations of about 500 varieties of symbols can very well be accepted as the core element of the tantric or ritualistic practices⁴.

It was in this background that the Mauryan art appears with certain revolutionary art formulae under the patronage of Aśoka. The use of stone, excellent finish, lustrous polish, minute carving and beautiful calligraphy were some of its important hallmarks⁵. The products have two sharp and distinct variations viz. the court art typified by the lofty columns with surmounting animals or a *dharmaçakra* and the other category being the peoples' art represented by some *yakṣa* statues and the so called ring stones or discs which are dated in the 3rd-2nd century B.C. While the monumental court art is not altogether devoid of esoterism as suggested by the animals, wheel and-honeysuckle motif, the ringstone pointedly bespeak the well established convention of mother cult or female energy.

These ringstones have been found in northern belt extending from Taxila to Pataliputra. The first specimen was found by Cunningham at Sankisa, Uttar Pradesh in the late 19th century⁶. Since then these have been recovered from different spots and published by scholars with their own interpretation. S.P. Gupta has rendered a valuable document and has also summarised various theories⁷. As per his report - sixty-four specimens have so far come to light and these hail from Murtaziganj near Patna, Vaisali, Chirand (Bihar), Rajghat (Varanasi), Kausambi, Bhita and Jhusi (Allahabad), Sahgaura (Gorakhpur), Sankisa (Fatehgarh), Mathura, Purana Qila, New Delhi, unidentified provenance in Haryana, Ropar (Punjab) and Taxila (Pakistan). Of these, the largest number i.e., 23 was recovered from Murtaziganj and the adjoining localities near Patna alone. It is somewhat surprising to note that the ratio of perforated and flat ones

⁴ P. L. GUPTA, *Coins*, Delhi, 1969, p. 9.

⁵ N. R. RAY, *Mauryan Art. The Age of Imperial Unity*, Delhi, 1951, pp. 506-510.

⁶ A. CUNNINGHAM, *Archaeological Survey Reports*, Varanasi, Vol. XI, pl. IX, Fig. 3.

⁷ S. P. GUPTA, *The Roots of Indian Arts*, Delhi, 1980, pp. 53-77.

is just fifty-fifty. But this is a tentative conclusion and the figure may change.

The objects with hole have been termed as Ring Stones and those without perforation are known as Disc Stones⁸. Another curious fact unfold from the location of the provenance of these objects is that the number of ringstones (with hole) is higher in the western side and in the eastern side the number of discs (without hole) dominates. Taxila, the western most site has yielded seven ringstones and not a single discstone. On the other hand, the eastern-most site i.e., Murtaziganj near Patna has yielded twenty-one discstones and only two ring stones⁹.

Stylistically, the Taxila group seems to be anterior and the rendering of mother goddess closely resembles the terracotta female figures belonging to the Mauryan period and hailing from the same region. Moreover, as it will be discussed later, the ringstones beside the peoples' faith also seem to illustrate the folk and the Vedic concept of Aditi or Mahīmātā as the land of Punjab was the cradle of the Vedic civilization. As such, the concept of ringstone must have travelled from west to east in the pre-Christian centuries and by the time it reached the Gangetic plain the ringstones started to be shaped as discs. Perforation in a thick hard stone tablet required more time and skill and this must not have been possible when the demand rose. Their use gradually became redundant with the transfer of theme on the contemporary *stūpa* architecture. The size of these rings or discs somewhat varies from place to place. In the western side it is larger with 9 to 7 cms in diameter and in the eastern side it measures between 7 and 4 cms.

Artistically, these small stone circles betray a superb workmanship. It appears that the stone was handled by excellent

⁸ The ratio of Ring Stones and Disc Stones as under Ring Stones: Murtaziganj 2, Chirand 1, Rajghat 4, Kausambi 8, Jhusi 1, Bhita 1, Sahgaura 1, Mathura 4, Purana Qila, New Delhi 1, Haryana 1, Ropar 1 and Taxila 7. Disc Stones: Murtaziganj 21, Vaisali 2, Rajghat 2, Kausambi 4, Sankisa 1 and Mathura 2.

Besides there are several fragmentary pieces in different collection as is the case of Bharat Kala Bhavan.

⁹ S. P. GUPTA, *op. cit.*

ivory carvers whose products were in great demand in the north-west frontiers and beyond. This presumption is subsequently corroborated by an inscription on the southern gateway of the Sanchi stūpa which was carved by the guild of ivory workers who were residents of Vidisha¹⁰. The details are minute but fine and in most cases these have been finished with fine polish. There is a perfect balance of composition and the rhythmic movement of figures set in different bands forming outer or inner circle is remarkable.

The most important part is the theme of illustration. The female figure is generally the focal point. She majestically stands with splayed feet and arms slightly outstretched. A wig type hair, ear rings, necklace and bangles are conspicuous. The waist is thin and hips are broad. Either she is shown nude or the mount of venus is concealed by the lines of girdle. But in some cases she is depicted with garments. In complete circle she is repeated several times where a tree or honeysuckle (*nāgapuṣpa*) motif or a pillar works as a divider. Sometimes the figure is surrounded by birds, animals and acolytes.

Besides these common features the deity is shown with variations. The Sirkap (Taxila) ringstone presents the nude goddess with honeysuckle on either side and the rhizomes of the two large flowers issue from her feet. In another specimen from Sirkap (Taxila) the goddess holds rhizomes of a large honeysuckle flower with her both outstretched arms. Large round ear rings, a double stringed necklace with a central bead falling between the breasts and remains of girdle are noteworthy. The two interesting points are that her expression is joyous and the posture of body is somewhat bent. One gets the impression that the deity feels happy with the blooming nature. The nudity in this case remains concealed.

The discstone from Rajghat shows the nude mother goddess flanked by a stag to left and bird to right. The composition terminates with palm trees on either side. A Murtaziganj disc depicts the deity with crescent on both sides of her head followed by a palm tree on one side and the date tree on the other. The background is

¹⁰ S. K. SARASWATI, *A Survey of Indian Sculpture*, Delhi, 1975, p. 93.

filled by the running stag. In another, found from Kausambi, the nude deity holding two big stalks stands on a lotus flower. A large beaded string encircles her body from waist to feet. Here one is tempted to identify her as *lakṣmī* standing on lotus *padmesthitā lakṣmī*. One Murtaziganj disc shows the mother goddess with an arch shaped helmet-type headgear. She is flanked by running stags above and two birds below. The same theme is repeated thrice and bounded by somewhat bent palm trees.

From Murtaziganj again the disc represents a nude goddess with various ornaments and decorated headgear. She is flanked by horse, lion, stag and bird. Four similar scenes are bounded by the palm trees. A fragmentary ringstone from Ropar, Punjab displays in the upper running frieze a nude mother goddess standing with feet splayed. A man probably a devotee wearing stitched garment and a turban is seen approaching with right hand raised up. On the other side is a thatched hut (*parṇaśāla*) in front of which sits a sage wearing parch garment (*parṇavastra*) offers a round fruit probably *Vilva* to a lady.

A Rajghat stone disc is important for the fact that the fully robed deity emerges from or stands on the lotus and holds tendrils of the creeper. A disc from Mathura shows several female deities emerging from large flowers. The scene is repeated with a honeysuckle in between. A stone plaque from Kausambi is unique in the sense that it shows not only the nude goddess (lower half broken) but also her nude consort to right. These are some representative citations of the illustration of mother goddess from the lot of sixty four.

While we are mainly concerned with the identification and purpose of the depiction of the female figure on these circular stone items, the other motifs can also not be overlooked. The nature is quite dominant and birds, animals, snakes, lizards, crocodiles, trees, plants, creepers and flowers are profusely shown. Geometrical patterns, circles, crosses with reel, spoked wheels, triangles, double vertical lines, criss-cross motifs etc. have been tastefully rendered. Some of these designs can very well be explained as *yantra* suggesting the worship of male and female energies, through these

tablets. Mention should particularly made of a complex six spoked wheel with a central circle. The upper points of the spokes have further been diversified to form a network of spokes on which the birds are perched. The inner compartments, however, show six animals viz., lion, horse, bull, elephant, stag and probably a ram. These are not static but prancing or running. This stone disc hailing from Murtaziganj near Patna may represent the solar *yantra*. The discs with full blown lotus or a band with honeysuckle with or without the figure of the goddess should be identified as the *yantras* used to worship male or female energy. Since the lotus is very dear to lakṣmī or Śrī these have been called as Śrī Yantra or Śrī Cakra¹¹. On the other hand the lotus flower is associated with sun also.

The main problem which, however, remains before us is to know the purpose and identification of the female figure or the Mother Goddess. Eversince the object saw the light of the day in the 19th century the orientalisists have been trying to offer a convincing explanation. The first discoverer Cunningham in 1880 conjectured them to be the items of utilitarian nature serving as ladies' toilet¹², a hypothesis which was not favoured by the scholars. Coomaraswamy interpreted them as large ear rings but he himself raised doubt as some of the specimens were large and heavy and also devoid of perforation¹³.

Marshall, commenting on the aesthetic aspect of these beautiful items remarked, "For jewel like workmanship and exquisite finish these two objects are unsurpassed by any other specimens of stonework from ancient India¹⁴". He compared them with ringstones unearthed in the Indus Valley and thought that these were related to *yonis* or female symbols of generation. He further discarded the view that these objects could be used as ornaments¹⁵ and opined that

¹¹ V. S. AGRAWALA, *Indian Art*, Varanasi, 1965, p. 80.

¹² A. CUNNINGHAM, *op. cit.*

¹³ A. K. COOMARASWAMY, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, London, 1927, p. 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ J. MARSHALL, *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization*, I, London, 1931, p. 62.

the engraved nude figure represents the goddess of fertility i.e., Prithvī and the disc was a votive offering. He recalled that the earth was conceived as “wheel shaped” in the Ṛgveda and described as circular in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa¹⁶.

Commenting on the Murtaziganj discs Shere viewed that these objects were used as well decoration and were quite different than those found at Taxila bearing a hole¹⁷. Banerjee disagreed with the contention of Shere and thought that these rings and discs were to be compared with the pre-historic ringstones of Indus Valley and *yantras* of the Śāktas, Viṣṇupaṭṭas and the Jaina Āyāgapaṭṭas. Depiction of alligators, lizard (*godhā*), lion is associated with the Śakti cult in India which later developed into the worship of Mahiṣāsuramardinī, Durgā, Pārvatī and Caṇḍī¹⁸. The elaborately shown lotus flower, honeysuckle, palm and date trees around the goddess also suggest that she represents vegetation aspect and leads to the subsequently developed Mother Goddess worship.

Agrawala is more emphatic in pronouncing these objects as representatives of Śrī Cakra or Śrī Yantra and for this he profusely quotes the Śrī Sūkta from the Ṛgveda where the earth goddess has been called Devī, Kṣamā, Bhūmī, Prajā, Bhūta and mother of even animals (*paśūnāṃ rūpaṃ*). Her association with sun and moon has been suggested by the epithet Sūryā and Candrā. Lotus is very dear to her and she prefers to stand on the lotus seat (*Padmesthitā*). Since she is born out of water like lotus, her association with this beautiful flower is inseparable. Her company with various animals is explained by the terms like Aśvadāyī and Godāyī. The sound of trumpeting of elephants is much pleasing to her (*Hastināda-pramodini*) a source from which emerged the concept of Gajalakṣmī in the second century B.C.

The splayed feet of the goddess (turned outward) are indicative of her fleeting nature (*cañcalā*). In the Śrī Yantra whatever is under

¹⁶ Archaeological Survey of India, *Annual Report 1927-28*, p. 96.

¹⁷ S.A. SHERE, “Stone Discs found Murtaziganj”, in *Journal of the Bihar Research Society* 37 (1951), Pls. 3-4, pp. 178-190.

¹⁸ J. N. BANERJEE, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, Delhi, 1956, pp. 170-171.

her influence represents prosperity, abundance and longevity but the zone beyond her orbit is controlled by Apalakṣmī, Alakṣmī, Abhūti, Asaṃṛddhi or Jyeṣṭha. Sometimes Lakṣmī and Śrī are considered to be two divinities as consorts of Viṣṇu¹⁹. But on other hand, she is represented as a single goddess. The identification of Śrī with Pṛthvī is supported by the terms Karīṣiṇī and Bhūmi. This may, however, be pointed out that the Śrī Sūkta as can be gathered from the nature of its text is often accepted as an appendix to the Ṛgveda and much later in date.

Earlier, Motichandra had also thought on the same line and identified the Goddess as Śrī-Lakṣmī but his base was the citation from the Mahābhārata where sky-going horses are called as her mind born horses and the crocodile is the auspicious sign on her hand and a symbol of Kāmadeva as her son²⁰. According to him, the Śrī Sūkta should be dated before the Pali version of the Buddhist text²¹ about the 3rd century B.C. Discussing again this issue Motichandra thought after a quarter of century that the cult of Mother Goddess came from western Asia as the priests on the discs wear kilt like under garment as was the case in Babylonia²². He identified the Goddess as Prithvī and accepted Bloch's similar explanation for the Laurianandangarh gold plaque deity²³.

Pramod Chandra analysing the pieces in the collection of Bharat Kala Bhavan, Banaras Hindu University makes two categories, the first following the Taxila group with frontal and hieratic pose and vulva more conspicuous, honeysuckle and hole being important features. In the second group the hole is absent, petals, radiate from the central knob, cross and reel are replaced by lotus and animals and birds are repeatedly shown²⁴. He concludes. "The frequent

¹⁹ V. S. AGRAWALA, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

²⁰ MOTICHANDRA, "Our Lady of Beauty and Abundance-Padmaśrī", in *Journal of the U.P. Historical Society* 21 (1948), p. 16-18.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²² S. P. GUPTA, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.

²³ T. BLOCH, "Excavations at Lauriya", in *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Report* (1906-07), p. 119.

²⁴ PRAMOD CHANDRA, "The Cult of Sri-Lakshmi and Four Carved Discs" in *Bharat Kala Bhavan, Chhavi* (1971), pp. 140-143.

occurrence of palm trees and honeysuckle, both associated with the sacred tree in West Asia from the earliest times to the Achaemenid period and also of priest/worshippers dressed in kilt-like skirts and possessed of facial features generally associated with non-Indian types raise important questions regarding the part played by West Asia in the development of Śrī Lakṣmī²⁵.

As already pointed out, S.P. Gupta has not only elaborately documented all sixty four stone rings and discs but has also given gist, of the theories propounded by scholars on the subject. But disagreeing with most of them he thinks that "a large body of popular as well as esoteric practices never seem to have found their way to the Vedic and Epic literature. According to him, the nude goddess should not be identified either Śrī or Lakṣmī or Śrī Lakṣmī or Māyā or Śakti. He considers the fabrication and use of ringstones as the natural course of development of Indian beliefs and practices which like others became extinct in the 2nd-1st century B.C."²⁶

He interprets the nude mother goddess as representing the life cycle which includes both life and death. Many a mother goddesses on the ring or disc stones are to be compared with the female figure on the gold plaque excavated from the Lauria Nandangarh *stūpa* which symbolises death. At the same time the fertility and procreation aspects are suggested by nudity, lotus, creepers, etc. Thus according to Gupta, the ring or disc stones represent the complete cycle of birth, death and rebirth²⁷. At the same time he is agreeable to accept them as *yantras* or *cakras* with magico-religious potency following some religious practices or rituals which were prevalent in the region of Uttarāpatha in the Mauryan-Śunga age²⁸.

The scrutiny of these ring and disc stones and survey of views advanced by oriental and occidental scholars make a wonderful study of art and religion in the pre-Christian centuries in India. Our own conclusions are as under:

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

²⁶ S. P. GUPTA, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

1. Aesthetically these specimens are superb creation of Indian plastic art.
2. The so called Ring stones i.e., with perforation were more popular in the Western side while the hole was not favoured in the eastern part.
3. These objects were found between Taxila and Pataliputra.
4. Stylistically and agewise the Taxila specimens are anterior to the Patna finds as such this cult of Mother Goddess appears to have travelled from West to East.
5. The region of the undivided Punjab continued to be the stronghold of Vedic religion and was considered to be the sacred land even in the Epic Age²⁹ when a number of folk and other elements were assimilated. The traditions established in that part were generally followed in the other parts of the country.
6. These beautiful specimens carved with lot of symbols, trees, creepers, flowers, animals and also the female figure represent an age of transition when the symbols were prominent and the anthropomorphic form was emerging. This trend was subsequently followed in the *stūpa* architecture at Bharhut, Sanchi, Mathura and Bodhgaya in the 2nd-1st century B.C.
7. There seems no doubt in accepting these circular discs with or without hole as *yantra cakra* used for esoteric practices or a mystic function.
8. The female figure must be accepted as Mother Goddess who diversified in cosmic form representing different forms such as Pṛthivī, Śrī, Lakṣmī, Mātā, Mahīmātā, Aditī, etc.
9. The concept appears to be a grand finale of eclecticism adopted by Vedic, Epic and Folk cults.
10. The *yantra* or *tantra* aspect later emerged through beautiful square stone tablets known as *āyāgapaṭṭa* or Pūjāśilā unearthed at Mathura and belonging to 1st century B.C. - 1st century A.D. These are tastefully decorated with lot of symbols, maidens, and sometimes bear a small figure of Jina or his aniconic form.

²⁹ लोकेख्यातं पंचनदं च पुण्यम् *Mahābhārata*, *Vanaparva*, Ch. 134. 12.

Later, these motifs were illustrated in the Kalpasūtra Pothis as dreams of the mother of Jina.

11. The honeysuckle motif which has a snake form (*nāgapuṣpaka*) at Taxila gradually loses its original form and seen much diluted at Kauśambi where it is depicted more as a large flower and less as snake. Travelling further east towards Pataliputra it is overtaken by lotus, palm and date trees.
12. The running animals as represented in the stone discs can well be compared with the animals carved on the abacus of Aśokan columns and as such fresh interpretation of the symbolism of these columns has to be thought of.
13. The number of the spokes in the wheel is not uniform but if these are six, twelve and twenty four, one feels inclined to give them different significance as seasons, months, *pakṣas*, etc.
14. No doubt the terminology given in the Śrī Sūkta resembles the carving of these medallions and as such a cosmic manifestation of female energy can safely be conjectured but the masculine aspect is not altogether missing. In this we do find a nude male side by side with a female³⁰. The solar discs have also come to light and these must be associated with the cosmic representation of the Male God. For this, we are reminded of some portions of the Puruṣasūkta.
15. The purpose of these rings or discs has been a debatable issue. Their use as votive offerings, worship objects or decorative pieces may of course be considered but to us these objects must also have served the purpose of amulets or astrolobes to ward off evils or atmospheric effect particularly on occasions like solar and lunar eclipse. These could be tied in the neck of elephants or horses as pendants for their protection in battle field. The carving of *yantra* type design or mother goddess enhanced their mystic significance. It may safely be conjectured that these ties either put on by men and women or tied on the neck of elephants, horses and sacred cows, or even kept in homes must have been further sanctified through hymns whether from the

³⁰ PRAMOD CHANDRA, *op. cit.*, fig. 300.

Vedic scripts or from the folk lores. This esoteric practice aimed at protection against evil spirits and furtherance of prospects.

16. The size, shape and weight of these objects allow their frequent movement and transportation as souvenirs or ritual objects. Thus even if fabricated at one place these could have been carried away easily.
17. Some of these bear Brāhmī inscriptions which in certain cases seem to have been incised at a later date.
18. Whether this concept was indigenous or came from Western Asia is difficult to assess. India was open to West even in the pre-Alexanderian period and exchange of art and mystic motifs must have been a regular trend. There was a common Orient and India played a significant role in shaping its culture.